The Bad Theology Behind Children in ICE Detention Centers | Romans 13; 1 Peter 2

An Examination by Theology Together

Kids in ICE Custody

My 2-year-old loves watching Ms. Rachel's videos. He loves the songs, the words, and her gentle encouragement. So I was surprised when she popped up in my social media feed visiting Washington D.C., wearing a pink pantsuit, and carrying letters and pictures from children held in the Dilley Immigration Detention Center.[1]

Here's what I've learned since Ms. Rachel spoke up:

1. ICE has detained over 6,200 kids during President Trump's second term, an average of 226 children a day, and as high as 500 a day in January 2026.[2]
2. 25 babies and toddlers are in ICE custody on average every single day.[3]
3. The *Flores Settlement Agreement* says children must be released after 20 days in detention, but some are staying as long as 323 days in detention.[4] The government is not obeying the laws of our country.
4. Children in custody show signs of trauma, depression, poor medical care, and poor food conditions.[5]

[1] https://www.instagram.com/reels/DZarqOmuiV1/

[2] Anna Flagg and Shannon Heffernan, "ICE Has Detained 6,200+ Kids in Trump's Second Term, Up 10x Since Biden Left Office," The Marshall Project, April 6, 2026, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2026/04/06/ice-kids-detention-over-6200-trump.

[3] Jacob Soboroff, Kay Guerrero, Anna Flagg, and Shannon Heffernan, "Trump Has Put 500 Babies and Toddlers In Immigration Jails," The Marshall Project, June 9, 2026, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2026/06/09/babies-and-toddlers-in-ice-detention.

[4] https://prospect.org/2026/07/20/trump-administration-routinely-violating-immigrant-childrens-rights/

[5] https://www.facebook.com/reel/1942014386670119

A mom with her five-year-old daughter said, "It's a prison here – it is truly a living hell. It's not a good place for anyone. All of the children here are suffering. The mothers are crying – especially for their children. We are all suffering."[6]

What sparked me to make this video was the reactions to Ms Rachel on social media. I saw people reacting with laughter emojis, as if Ms. Rachel's compassion for children in distress shouldn't be taken seriously.

We can do better.

Today I want to do three things. I want to explain the theology I think is used to justify this kind of thing. I want to show you what the Bible actually says about it. And at the end, I'm going to give you a simple step you can take today to help these children.

What theology is used to justify this?

I most frequently hear Christians reference **Romans 13:1-7** in support of deporting those who came here illegally. In Romans 13, Paul tells Christians to submit to the governing authorities because God has established them. No government exists apart from God's will, and those who disobey bring judgment on themselves.

The implication is that those who have entered this country illegally have broken the law, and there are consequences for doing so. In fact, Paul even says in verse 3, "Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong." Entering the country without legal authorization is rebellion against the government, sin, and so the consequences are their own fault. Their children's suffering is on them.

Likewise, **1 Peter 2:13-17** says to submit to human authorities for they are "sent by [God] to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." National governments have the right to set and enforce borders, and all people must submit to those authorities and their processes.

Here's what's true. God does call us as Christians to submit to the government, whether it's good or bad. God does give governments a unique authority to enforce order, and we should recognize that God-given authority.

Now if we only look at Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, we might think that God is for every decision a government makes. But if we look at what Scripture tells us as a whole, we're going to see why God does not condone this kind of behavior.

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[6] Priscilla Alvarez and Michael Williams, "Exclusive: Migrant Families Paint Grim Picture of Life in Texas ICE Detention Facility, New Court Documents Show," CNN, December 9, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/09/politics/migrant-families-ice-detention-facility-texas.

What does the Bible actually teach us?

I'm going to go from Old Testament to New Testament—5 stages—showing this is not right, starting in Genesis.

1. Genesis teaches cultivation, not domination

We need to go back to Genesis 1 where God gives us the purpose of government in Genesis 1. In **Genesis 1:26**, God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule…" (NIV)[7] God empowers humankind to rule over the fish, birds, livestock, all creation. And in **verse 28**, God explains what that rule should look like "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it…"

God gives humankind the right to rule, but to rule for the purpose of bringing life and flourishing to people and God's good creation. The concept of "subdue" in Genesis 1 points us not to domination, but to cultivation. We are to take and shape this world for humanity's benefit—all of humanity's benefit.[8]

So how does this stack up against Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2? It teaches us that the purpose of Government, as God intends it, is to bring flourishing to humanity. Good government recognizes that every person is made in God's image and is worthy of dignity, respect, and to be treated like people on thrones, not animals in cages.

Cultivation, not domination.

But Genesis doesn't last. When Adam and Eve sin, we distort humanity's calling. The fall distorts cultivation into domination. Adam rules over Eve. We are cast out of Eden and become foreigners. Cain kills Abel. People start to hurt each other. But Genesis' vision is for cultivation, not domination.

2. Exodus through Deuteronomy remembers Egypt.

And the hurt goes on and on until Pharaoh is casting baby immigrant boys into the Nile. Why? Because he saw immigrant children as a political threat.

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[7] Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

[8] Genesis 1:18 NET Bible Note: "In Gen 1:28 one might paraphrase it as follows: "harness its potential and use its resources for your benefit." In an ancient Israelite context this would suggest cultivating its fields, mining its mineral riches, using its trees for construction, and domesticating its animals."

Once God delivered his people from Egypt, he gave them laws to ensure the wickedness of Pharaoh would never happen again—laws that protect foreigners.

Exodus 22:21 "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt."

Exodus 23:9 "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt."

Leviticus 19:33-34 "'When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

Deuteronomy 24:17-18 "Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice… Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there."

God specifically grounds treatment of foreigners in how his people were treated in Egypt, and says, "Remember Egypt. Don't be like them." In fact, God's people are to treat foreigners as well as native-borns. We're to "Love them as yourself." We're to be neighborly to foreigners.[9]

So how does this stack up against Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2? It teaches us that the purpose of Government, as God intends it, is to protect outsiders and immigrants. When government and politicians are representing God well, they are treating foreigners the same way they would want to be treated. Notice that scripture isn't saying we should have open borders or no immigration system, but rather, every person, especially foreigners, should be treated with respect and care.

Remember Egypt.

Do God's people listen? They struggle, and so the prophet Jeremiah warns them that if they oppress the foreigner, they themselves will become foreigners.

3. Those who despise the exile risk becoming the exile.

Jeremiah 7:6-7 says, "If you do not oppress the foreigner… then I will let you live in this place."

[9] Exodus 23:12; Leviticus 23:22; 24:22; 25:35; Numbers 15:15-16; 35:15; Deuteronomy 10:18-19; 24:19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19

Jeremiah 22:3, 5 says, "This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right… Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner… But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.'"

God is speaking to kings in Jeremiah 22. If you are one of our elected officials, know this. If you despise the exile, you risk becoming the exile. If not in this life, you will face God in the next, and you don't want to face an eternal exile. Repent and show mercy.

So how does this stack up against Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2? It teaches us that governments that treat foreigners cruelly may themselves become foreigners. God gives governments authority so they can serve people, not abuse them, especially vulnerable people groups like immigrants and refugees.

In the last book of the Old Testament, God promises judgment is coming against those who mistreat the most vulnerable.

Malachi 3:5 says, "'So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against… [those who] deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,' says the Lord Almighty."

God promises to come in judgment against those who mistreat foreigners and immigrants. And one day, God will fulfill his promise in Malachi that he will come in judgment against those who mistreat foreigners.

But before God comes in judgment, he comes in grace, offering the chance to repent and turn away from this sin.

4. God comes as a foreigner and a child.

God stepped out of heaven into human flesh as a small baby boy, and faced the Pharaoh of his day, Herod, who ordered all the little boys in Bethlehem killed—Pharaoh again seeing children as a political threat.

And do you know where Jesus fled? Egypt.

Jesus retraced the steps of his ancestors, going into exile, becoming a foreigner. Why? So that he could become a Savior of foreigners, a Savior of exiles. Apart from Jesus, we are foreigners from God's presence. We are exiles. Jesus becomes an exile to rescue exiles—you and me and little children. Jesus walks in the shoes of children taken into ICE captivity. He knows what it's like.

When Jesus' own followers try to prevent children from coming to him because he's too big and important, Jesus declares the value of children.

Matthew 19:14 "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

And if you treat children with contempt, Jesus warns you in **Luke 17:2**, "It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble." ICE detention centers are causing severe childhood trauma that will produce a lifetime of stumbling.

So how does this stack up against Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2? It reminds us that the one who gives power and authority to governments knows what it's like to be mistreated by bad authority. King Jesus gives authority to governments so they can protect children, not abuse them. As Christians, we can affirm a thoughtful immigration system while also opposing cruelty to children

5. As Christians, we're exiles and children of God.

In **1 Peter 2:11**, the Apostle Peter calls Christians "foreigners and exiles." And the Apostle Paul reminds us in **Philippians 3:20**, "Our citizenship is in heaven." In **Hebrews 11:13**, the heroes of our faith saw themselves as "foreigners and strangers on earth." They saw themselves as foreigners because their citizenship is in the skies.

Christian, remember your citizenship.

Christian, long for a better country.

1 John 3:1 says, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!"

Christian, remember your status as a child of God.

Your Heavenly Father loves you. You are a citizen of his country.

Knowing our status enables us to become the best citizens of this country because our complete loyalty is not to a President or king, but to Jesus.

So how does this stack up against Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2? It gives us compassion for foreigners and children because we ourselves are foreigners, belonging to a different country, and children of God.

In this country, we elect the government, and in that way, we are the government. Elections are coming. We have the right to elect and empower officials to change

bad laws and create good processes. How we use our God-given authority matters. If we use God's authority to hurt immigrant children, we're misusing our power. But if we're using our God-given authority to care for and protect the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of vulnerable immigrant children, we're doing better.

So what can you do today?

Go to commoncause.org/find-your-representative and type in your address. It will give you a list of your Senators and Representatives you can contact. Please use or adapt this script to write or call them, which I've put in the video description along with the website link:

> Hi, my name is [FIRST/LAST NAME], and I live in [CITY].
>
> I'm calling as a Christian who is concerned about children held in ICE detention, some for as long as 323 days, far beyond the legal 20-day limit set by the Flores Settlement Agreement.
>
> Scripture commands us to protect the foreigner and the child, not neglect them. I urge [REPRESENTATIVE/SENATOR NAME] to:
>
> 1. require the release of children held past the 20-day legal limit,
> 2. investigate and report on conditions for children at facilities like Dilley,
> 3. restore press and congressional access to these facilities.
>
> Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me." I hope you'll provide them with the compassion and care they deserve.
>
> We're praying for you. God bless.

If you're leaving a voicemail, please leave your full street address to ensure your call is tallied.[10]

Once you hang up, or mail your letter, spend some time in prayer, asking God to have mercy on these children and their families, and that God would soften our leaders' hearts to their needs.

Let us know in the comments if you called.

Thank you and God bless.

[10] Script adapted from https://5calls.org/issue/ice-detention-abuse/.

Discussion Questions

1. What's your general reaction to immigration issues? How does the presence of children change, or not change, your response?
2. How have you typically understood Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2's application to immigration?
3. How might the Genesis mandate for cultivation and flourishing reframe how you've thought about Christian engagement in politics?
4. What does the story of Israel and Egypt teach us about immigrants and asylum seekers?
5. What is an exile, and how can it help us relate to asylum seekers?
6. How does the incarnation enter into this issue?
7. How should we see ourselves in this country as Christians?
8. How are you going to respond to this issue?

Additional Resources

Faith & Flourishing in Politics Sermon Series by Jonathan Romig

Lecture on the Early Church & Politics: Tim Mackie (The Bible Project)

Who Are We?

Jonathan and Monica Romig have Master of Divinity (M.Div) degrees from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Jonathan also has a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) on Political Discipleship and 9 years of pastoral experience. Monica teaches Bible, Christian thought, and theology to high school students. Together, we love Jesus and hope you'll learn about God with us at Theology Together.

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Slide deck: https://theology-together.kit.com/ice-children

Substack: https://open.substack.com/pub/theologytogether/p/bad-theology-behind-children-in-ice-detention-romans-13-and-1-peter-2